

The Kamui Quartet: Prelude for Four Idiots

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The Kamui Quartet seek a cellist.

Classical / Modern / Original Compositions.

First violin / Founder: Nonon Jakuzure

Second violin: Lady Satsuki Kiryuin

Viola: The Underachiever Mako Mankanshoku

Apply within.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2014-12-28

Words: 1910

Original source: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/2902784>

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Chapter 1

The audition wasn't going well.

The sound of an open C string echoed away to nothingness, and the young woman on stage looked up expectantly.

"Thank you, Miss Ogure. That was a sterling rendition of..."

At the makeshift table amongst the threadbare velvet of the folding seats, the right-most inquisitor leafed through a stack of papers.

"... a single octave of the major scale in C."

Beside her, the middle, most senior, and shortest inquisitor put her head in her hands, letting her pink hair flow despondently through her fingers.

"Miss Jakuzure..." The left-most of the trio leant towards her despairing colleague and whispered, "Who's the composer?"

Nonon Jakuzure slowly turned her head towards the perpetually cheerful presence to her side.

"It's a scale, underachiever. It doesn't have a composer."

"Mankanshoku has a first name, Nonon."

Nonon rolled her head and looked to her other side.

Did you actually just say that, Satsuki? But, despite her best efforts, she could perceive no trace of either irony or humor in the young woman's expression. Just the same air of stoic refinement that had already drawn a few critical comments of "lack of emotion" during their first performances together.

She looked back up at the stage. The bespectacled girl hadn't moved, the cello still poised awkwardly, the bow raised in expectant salutation.

"I know the G major scale too, if that's any help!"

Nervous optimism resonated from her.

"And I can try a C minor scale, but I can't guarantee it'll be quite correct!"

Nonon pinched the bridge of her nose; the entire morning had been a repetition of this moment - theme and variations.

"You know most of these losers have only turned up for a chance to see you, Satsuki."

"I fail to understand that as a motivation."

What was worse - the chronic ineptitude of those who'd appeared to audition for the role of cellist in the quartet, or Satsuki's ongoing inability to recognize the aura that left men and women swooning in her wake?

"That'll be all, Miss Ogure. Don't call us..."

"We'll call you!" Mako Mankanshoku jiggled enthusiastically.

"No, just don't call us." Nonon glanced daggers to her side.

Maiko Ogure didn't budge.

"I could try to improvise..."

"*Thank you*, Miss Ogure."

"Or an arpeggio?"

The clock was ticking on the time they still had the hall booked. Satsuki gestured to the wings.

“Mr Gamagoori - if you would be so kind.”

A goliath of a man unfolded himself from near the fire curtain, and strode on stage, collecting the hapless performer under one arm, and her cello under the other.

“I’m happy to make flyers for your concerts! I know how to use MS Paint!”

The voice dwindled amongst the props and backdrops as she was carried to the exit.

“I have a blog!!”

Nonon looked down the list; there was only one person still to audition. Once that was out of the way, there was little point other than to pack up for the day and re-run the advert until some more candidates appeared:

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Second violin: Lady Satsuki Kiryuin

Viola: The Underachiever Mako Mankanshoku

It seemed hopeless to the point of despair. Shinra Koketsu, the orchestra conducted by Satsuki’s mother, had absorbed nearly every competent musician in the Honnouji area. It was a miracle that Nonon and Satsuki had found Mankanshoku, even with all her peculiarities.

And the venue wasn't helping either: the tiny stage, the appalling acoustics, the tattered seats that coughed out dust or worse when you sat, aged but without the benefit of antiquity.

"Are you sure there wasn't anywhere better we could have booked, Satsuki?"

With her slender limbs and long black hair, some might have referred to the young woman to Nonon's right as "willowy", but if she was, it was a willow that had stood in defiance of storms and tsunami for a hundred years or more.

"Mother has them all booked for Shinra Koketsu."

"They can't be playing at all of them at the same time!"

"That matters little - Mother has the resources to book them just to spite me."

A battered violin case lurked ominously behind their seats.

"Couldn't you just give 'Junketsu' back to her?"

It was a rare stellar event, but Satsuki seemed a little smaller, diminished, and just maybe a little sad.

"It would change nothing - she will not rest until I have joined her ensemble."

Nonon rocked on her seat, allowing the cushion to rise slightly as it lifted her feet from the floor. Fair enough; they were stuck here in the tiny theatre, sandwiched between pachinko parlors, love hotels and night clubs. They'd make the best of it: Mankanshoku's enthusiasm, Satsuki's encyclopedic musical knowledge, and the good looks and sheer charisma of the majestic Nonon Jakuzure would be enough to find the fourth member of their quartet.

Hope for the best. Plan for the worst. That was something that Satsuki would say, wasn't it? Time to reiterate the theme and allow

for some development.

“Underachiever... Would Gamagoori be available to post some flyers for us this evening?”

“Sorry, Miss Jakuzure. Sempai’s tied up this evening!”

Tied up this evening.

Nonon shuddered slightly.

Mankanshoku thought nothing but the best of people.

So Mankanshoku never locked her cell, even when she left it on the table.

And once, and only once, Nonon had taken that opportunity to look in the photo album.

What has been seen...

Tied up this evening.

... Can never be unseen.

A scruffy stage-hand appeared on stage, a cello slung effortlessly over one shoulder, and stood awkwardly, apparently waiting for instruction.

“Yes, yes. Just leave it there by the chair. That’ll do fine.” Nonon testily waved the girl off stage.

“Thank you, young lady,” Satsuki called out, seemingly desperate to inject some good manners into the proceedings.

Ryuko Matoi.

Nonon reviewed the list one final time. That would be it for the day. Whoever she was, she’d arrived so late that she hadn’t even told

them what she'd be playing.

"Miss Matoi!"

Her voice was swallowed up, suffocated in the velvet cushions and curtains.

"Miss Matoi! Ryuko Matoi!" Patience was beginning to wear as thin as the threadbare furnishings.

The stage-hand appeared again from the wings.

"You! Slacker! Tell Matoi to get out here or she can forget about an audition."

The young woman appeared relieved, and wandered center-stage.

"Right you are."

Ryuko Matoi settled herself in the chair and peered at her audience: three fates almost hidden in the glare of the spotlights. A coconut, a troll, and... wow... there was a real beauty on the right: dark hair down past her shoulders, so black it shimmered like starlight, dropped-spindle eyebrows full of the authority and mastery of a great maestro, and a body crammed into a smart black dress that was sinuous with dangerous alpine curves. Time to make an impression.

"Mind if I tune up?"

"If you think it will make any difference." Nonon already wasn't a fan of the mysterious Miss Matoi, and was less happy still with the attention Satsuki and even Mankanshoku seemed to be giving her. But the way she'd hefted the cello - moving it with ease and grace like it was a part of her - had been mesmerizing.

Ryuko tightened her bow, set her free hand on the pegs, and bowed the C string with fervor - listening for the slightest imperfection in the tone. Nonon fumed and leant across to Satsuki.

“Don’t tell me she’s got perfect pitch too,” she whispered.

“That would seem to be the case.” Satsuki had her eyes closed - but try as she might she could find no flaw in Matoi’s tuning as she moved between the strings.

Ryuko turned the peg of the A string through an almost imperceptible fraction of a degree, concentrating on how it beat against the adjacent string as she bowed them together. Finally satisfied, she lifted her bow and let the notes die away to nothingness. For a moment the little theater had seemed as spacious as a venue seating several thousand.

“Don’t think you’re going to impress us with sheer volume,” Nonon was reduced to sticking her tongue out as a riposte to the wonderful resonances that had filled the little hall, “Or were you just trying to deafen us so we won’t hear how badly you play?”

Ryuko grinned, but kept her eyes on the Eyebrow Queen and ignored the smaller - though not unattractive - distractions to her side.

“‘Madam, you have between your legs an instrument capable of giving pleasure to thousands - and all you can do is scratch it.’ I wouldn’t want to be remembered that way. Know who said that?”

A satisfactory glow of pink spread across Satsuki’s face, but she didn’t look away.

“The great English conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham.”

“Yeah - right first time. You win a free ticket to my next solo performance.”

“I can’t imagine you’ll need much of a concert hall for that audience, Matoi.” Nonon was now desperate to interrupt the flow of strange energies between Satsuki and the disheveled cellist.

“Nah... A little room just big enough for the two of us would be just fine.” Ryuko winked in triumph.

I can't believe I walked into that one. Nonon was about to prepare another broadside, a last ditch attempt to repel the pirate that seemed intent on carrying off her friend, but Satsuki interrupted the charging of the cannons.

“That instrument of yours... is somewhat singular, is it not? The damage near the right hand f-hole - perhaps that might be responsible for its unique tone, Miss Matoi?” She was fascinated but what appeared to be a broad ‘X’, scored into the surface of the wood, right across the opening.

“‘Ryuko’ to you, princess. Yeah, that’s the secret of ‘Senketsu’ alright. That and the blood, sweat and tears Dad put into him.”

Ryuko turned the cello back and forth slightly, twisting the neck so that the body caught the light, revealing the deep red tint of the varnish.

Matoi, Matoi, Matoi. The name hummed in Satsuki’s mind. Surely this... *delinquent*... in front of them couldn’t be the daughter of Isshin Matoi, the feted luthier. Isshin Matoi, the only Japanese ever to establish a workshop in Cremona, the birthplace of Antonio Stradivari. Oh, how her late father would have wished to meet this girl and pepper her with questions about her family’s techniques and secrets.

Satsuki’s reverie was shattered by the resonant enthusiasm emanating from the other end of the table.

“I’m Mako Mankanshoku, Ryuko-chan! But you can call me Mankanshoku! Or Underachiever! What are you going to play for us?! You tuned up so nicely that I’m sure you could even get a beautiful sound out of me if you put me between your legs!”

That remark got a silent, sidelong glance from both Nonon and Satsuki this time, but Ryuko smiled - the warm reception was offsetting the frosty glare from the middle of the table.

“Hello Mako! It’s a little something by an English composer, but I doubt you’ll have heard of him.”

Nonon narrowed her eyes.

“You can skip the hipster superiority, Matoi. Between myself and Lady Satsuki, our knowledge of music is all-encompassing.”

The tiniest of shrugs, and Ryuko settled herself to begin.

“Anyway, here’s *Murus Mirabilis*. ”

And she attacked the opening chord.

The function of music is to release us from the tyranny of conscious thought.

- Sir Thomas Beecham